M. K. GANDHI

An Autobiography

OR

THE STORY OF MY EXPERIMENTS WITH TRUTH

Translated from the original Gujarati by Mahadev Desai

With an Introduction by S. Radhakrishnan

PENGUIN BOOKS
expect you next Sunday and look forward to hearing all about your
child-marriage and to the pleasure of laughing at your expense.
Need I assure you that our friendship is not in the least affected by
this incident?"
I thus purged myself of the canker of untruth, and I never
thereafter hesitated to talk of my married state wherever
necessary.

20 Acquaintance with Religions

Towards the end of my second year in England I came across two
Theosophists, brothers, and both unmarried. They talked to me
about the Gita. They were reading Sir Edwin Arnold's translation
— The Song Celestial — and they invited me to read the original
with them. I felt ashamed, as I had read the divine poem
neither in Sanskrit nor in Gujarati. I was constrained to tell them
that I had not read the Gita, but that I would gladly read it with
them, and that though my knowledge of Sanskrit was meagre, still
I hoped to be able to understand the original to the extent of telling
where the translation failed to bring out the meaning. I began
reading the Gita with them. The verses in the second chapter

If one
Ponders on objects of the sense, there springs
Attraction; from attraction grows desire,
Desire gives rise to fierce passion, passion breeds
Recklessness; then the memory — all betrayed —
Less noble purpose go, and seizes the mind,
Till purpose, mind, and man are all undone.

made a deep impression on my mind, and they still ring in my ears.
The book struck me as one of priceless worth. The impression has
ever since been growing on me with the result that I regard it today
as the book par excellence for the knowledge of Truth. It has
afforded me invaluable help in my moments of gloom. I have read
almost all the English translations of it, and I regard Sir Edwin
Arnold's as the best. He has been faithful to the text, and yet it does
not read like a translation. Though I read the Gita with these
friends, I cannot pretend to have studied it then. It was only after
some years that it became a book of daily reading.

The brothers also recommended The Light of Asia by Sir Edwin
Arnold, whom I knew till then as the author only of The Song
Celestial, and I read it with even greater interest than I did the
Bhagavadgita. Once I had begun it I could not leave off. They also
took me on one occasion to the Blavatsky Lodge and introduced
me to Madame Blavatsky and Mrs Besant. The latter had just then
joined the Theosophical Society, and I was following with great
interest the controversy about her conversion. The friends advised
me to join the Society, but I politely declined saying, 'With my
meagre knowledge of my own religion I do not want to belong to
any religious body.' I recall having read, at the brothers' instance,
Madame Blavatsky's Key to Theosophy. This book stimulated in
me the desire to read books on Hinduism, and disabused me of the
notion fostered by the missionaries that Hinduism was rife with
superstition.

About the same time I met a good Christian from Manchester in
a vegetarian boarding house. He talked to me about Christianity. I
narrated to him my Rajkot recollections. He was pained to hear
them. He said, 'I am a vegetarian. I do not drink. Many Christians
are meat-eaters and drink, no doubt; but neither meat-eating nor
drinking is enjoined by Scripture. Do please read the Bible.' I
accepted his advice, and he gave me a copy. I have a faint recollec-
tion that he himself used to sell copies of the Bible, and I purchased
from him an edition containing maps, concordance, and other
aids. I began reading it, but I could not possibly read through the
Old Testament. I read the book of Genesis, and the chapters that
followed invariably sent me to sleep. But just for the sake of being
able to say that I had read it, I plodded through the other books
with much difficulty and without the least interest or understand-
ing. I disliked reading the book of Numbers.

But the New Testament produced a different impression, es-
specially the Sermon on the Mount which went straight to my heart.
I compared it with the Gita. The verses, 'But I say unto you, that ye
resist not evil: but whosoever shall smite thee on thy right cheek,
turn to him the other also. And if any man take away thy coat let
him have thy cloak too,' delighted me beyond measure and put me
in mind of Shamat Bhatt's 'For a bowl of water, give a goodly meal'
etc. My young mind tried to unify the teachings of the Gita, The
Light of Asia and the Sermon on the Mount. That renunciation
was the highest form of religion appealed to me greatly.
This reading whetted my appetite for studying the lives of other
religious teachers. A friend recommended Carlyle's Heroes and
Hero-Worship. I read the chapter on the Hero as a prophet and
learnt of the Prophet's greatness and bravery and austere living.

Beyond this acquaintance with religion I could not go at the
moment, as reading for the examination left me scarcely any time
for outside subjects. But I took mental note of the fact that I should
read more religious books and acquaint myself with all the principal
religions.

And how could I help knowing something of atheism too? Every
Indian knew Bradlaugh's name and his so-called atheism. I read
some book about it, the name of which I forget. It had no effect on
me, for I had already crossed the Sahara of atheism. Mrs Besant,
who was then very much in the limelight, had turned to theism
from atheism, and that fact also strengthened my aversion to
atheism. I had read her book How I Became a Theosophist.

It was about this time that Bradlaugh died. He was buried in the
Working Cemetery. I attended the funeral, as I believe every Indian
residing in London did. A few clergymen also were present to do
him the last honours. On our way back from the funeral we had to
wait at the station for our train. A clergyman from the
crowd heckled one of these clergymen. 'Well, sir, you believe in the
existence of God?'

'I do,' said the good man in a low tone.

'You also agree that the circumference of the Earth is 25,000
miles, don't you?' said the atheist with a smile of self-assurance.

'Indeed.'

'Pray tell me then the size of your God and where He may be.'

'Well, if we but knew, He resides in the hearts of us both.'

'Now, now, don't take me to be a child,' said the champion with
a triumphant look at us.
The clergyman assumed a humble silence.

This talk still further increased my prejudice against atheism.

2.1. नितांब के तत् श्रमं

Though I had acquired a nodding acquaintance with Hinduism
and other religions of the world, I should have known that it would
not be enough to save me in my trials. Of the thing that sustains
him through trials man has no inkling, much less knowledge, at the
time. If an unbeliever, he will attribute his safety to chance. It a
believer, he will say God saved him. He will conclude, as well he
may, that his religious study or spiritual discipline was at the back
of the state of grace within him. But in the hour of his deliverance
he does not know whether his spiritual discipline or something else
saves him. Who that has prided himself on his spiritual strength has
not seen it humbled to the dust? A knowledge of religion, as
distinguished from experience, seems but chaff in such moments of
trial.

It was in England that I first discovered the futility of mere
religious knowledge. How I was saved on previous occasions is
more than I can say, for I was very young then; but now I was
ten and had gained some experience as husband and father.

During the last year, as far as I can remember, of my stay in
England, that is in 1890, there was a Vegetarian Conference at
Portsmouth to which an Indian friend and I were invited. Portsmout
h is a sea-port with a large naval population. It has many
houses with women of ill fame, women not actually prostitutes,
but at the same time, not very scrupulous about their morals. We
were put up in one of these houses. Needless to say, the Reception
Committee did not know anything about it. It would have been
difficult in a town like Portsmouth to find out which were good
lodgings and which were bad for occasional travellers like us.

* 'Nirala de bola Ram' – Refrain of Sudder's famous hymn, 'He is the help of the
helpless, the strength of the weak.'